

## THE CASE FOR NON-VIOLENT ACTION FOR BRACERO CIVIL RIGHTS

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Civil rights of Mexican contract laborers -- braceros -- are as nearly nonexistent as those of Negroes in Mississippi.

Economic and physical exploitation is more obvious. One often hears of braceros housed in camps unfit for human use; charged \$1.75 a day for food worth perhaps 75¢; paid less than the minimum wage guaranteed in the U.S.-Mexico Migrant Labor Agreement; being given just enough work to pay their board, so they wind up a two-week pay period with three or four dollars. In a camp near Stockton, owned by labor contractors Loduca & Perry, braceros were given meat infected with staphylococci and became severely ill, yet the contractors refused for five hours to secure medical treatment for them. Toilets at Garcia camp overflowed, leaving two toilets in operating condition for some 600 braceros.

But, shameful as the material exploitation is, I am troubled more by the denial of personal freedoms and human dignity which accompanies and preserves material exploitation. A typical case was reported August 15 by Basilio B., a bracero:

One of the other braceros asked the boss this morning whether we would be working by the hour or by the crate. He was ordered to get off the bus, and was taken to the Association in Stockton. We are told that he is being shipped back to Mexico.

Such deportation is the usual means of handling "boys" who complain or ask "too many" questions. Braceros who protested conditions at Loduca & Perry camp this September were threatened with physical violence.

Employers' agents who select braceros at the border have been known to discriminate against applicants who have too much education -- as one bracero reported:

When they found out I had six years of school, they almost rejected me. I had a very hard time getting a contract. They want us to be dumb and dirty. The next time I come through, I will wear my old clothes, and I will pretend to be just as dumb as the next man.

The less schooling a bracero has, the more easily he can be manipulated and coerced.

Henry P. Anderson of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) cites other denials of civil rights:

I have never talked with a bracero who had had the slightest choice of what employer he was to work for, what crop he was to work in, or what wages and working conditions he would work under...

I have talked with braceros who were permitted to go to town only once every 15 days...

I have talked with braceros who were peremptorily shipped back to Mexico for asking to be taken to a doctor, or asking for an accounting of their wages...

I have never talked with a bracero who had been permitted to choose a spokesman, as provided in the basic documents, for dealing with employers and foremen. I have talked with a number of braceros who tried to exercise this right, only to find their spokesman was promptly shipped back to Mexico.

When humans are treated as though unworthy of respect, in Mississippi, California, or anywhere in the world, I do not merely feel compassion. I feel that my liberties and my human dignity have been threatened.

There is another parallel between California and Mississippi: these abuses, like the racial segregation of publicly owned facilities, are illegal. Almost all of them are specifically forbidden by federal law or regulation. And here, as in Mississippi, the exploiters are sufficiently powerful to ignore the law.

You discover this quickly when you report such violations to the U.S. Department of Labor. The officials promise an investigation, sometimes actually investigate, yet never prevent the abuse from continuing. It may be that these officials are unable to enforce federal law, but my personal opinion is that they are unwilling to displease growers.



Besides, as Henry Anderson points out, "grievance-settling is a trap. In any bracero camp in the country, one could find within half an hour, grievances which, if pursued to their settlement, would absorb one's total energies for six months or more."

Then, how else can we prevent exploitation of contract laborers?

The only complete solution is to abolish the system of shipping human beings as commodities in trade, whether between nations or within one nation. But we will not achieve complete abolition for years. Something must be done in the meantime.

Since growers, contractors, and their government allies support exploitation, other groups must act as countervailing forces. I suggest two: the braceros themselves, and the public.

Braceros have the power to deny employers the one thing they want from the system: the braceros' labor. Many braceros have attempted strikes this year, but have been only partially successful. To stand up to the well-organized employer-government coalition, braceros must have available detailed knowledge of their rights under their contract, support from American sympathizers to keep up morale, advice from experienced unionists during negotiations, and an elected chairman or negotiating committee.

In other words, braceros must be able to (a) communicate freely with their American friends, and (b) exercise their right, guaranteed in the contract yet never honored by employers, to elect representatives to negotiate with employers for proper maintenance of contractual guarantees. These two rights can, in my opinion, best be secured by non-violent direct action and by the pressure from the public which such action can stimulate.

An aroused citizenry would have the power to force unwilling government officials to respect these rights.

But most Americans know nothing about the thousands of braceros who each year suffer denial of their human dignity and civil liberties while guests of our nation. Efforts to inform the public by publishing leaflets, appearing at public hearings, and other traditional liberal methods have had little success.

Only non-violent direct action is sufficiently forceful and clear to awaken public opinion on the issue of bracero civil rights.

I joined in CORE sit-ins in Florida and was arrested, and I have watched southern Negroes win victory upon victory. We have all seen Freedom Riders force the huge Greyhound Corporation to integrate its southern facilities. I believe non-violent action is as meaningful and necessary a means to secure civil rights for Mexican braceros as it is for American Negroes.

The frontiers of freedom are in San Joaquin County, California, as surely as in Jackson or Johannesburg.

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